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SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR G/IWI

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TAGS: PHUM PREL KWMN KDEM KPAO TH

SUBJECT: WOMAN OF COURAGE" AND GRASS ROOTS LEADERSHIP

REF: A. A) BANGKOK 866

¶B. B) STATE 12871

¶11. To present Thailand's "Woman of Courage" award, Consulate General Chiang Mai took advantage of a program organized by the awardee herself, a training seminar on women and the constitution for paralegals and community leaders from 17 northern provinces. The event marked the first occasion the Consulate has hosted guests from all the provinces in our consular district.

¶12. Embassy Bangkok and Consulate Chiang Mai nominated Assoc. Prof. Virada Somsawasdi, founder of the Women's Studies Center of Chiang Mai University, for her contributions to promoting the role of women in the political and economic process in this region. Now the President of the Foundation for Women, Law and Rural Development, Prof. Virada has long played a key role in women's issues and education, including selecting graduate students from Laos for advanced studies at the Women's Center with Rockefeller Foundation funding. Nine of these students joined provincial Thai women leaders at a Consulate reception to present the "Woman of Courage" award March 20.

¶13. By honoring Virada at a reception hosted by the Consul General for participants in this seminar, the Consulate stepped serendipitously into a community of new contacts with grass roots leaders from throughout northern Thailand. These women, representing groups such as the Self Reliance Community of Kampangpetch, the Hmong Women's Network, and the Northern Region Agricultural Organization, told Consulate officers that the regular training they have received over time at the Women's Studies Center helps them with community duties that include administering village loan funds and mediating land disputes.

¶14. Our guests were engagingly eager to describe their work and their commitment to democratic local administration. When asked if she would like to run for parliament, an elected village official from Phitsanulok responded with a firm "yes". What about Prime Minister? "Yes", she said without hesitation. Acknowledging that politicians have a poor image in Thailand these days, she and her comrades asserted that women would be less susceptible to corruption than their male counterparts. An Uttaradit woman who works with community radio discussed her concern that the new constitution will be less generous with the "public's airwaves" and talked about the need to get the public and activists informed about this issue.

¶15. Virada expressed her thanks for "the very friendly, meaningful and memorable award ceremony", especially in the context of the training program for local leaders. The Consulate in turn would like to thank Embassy Bangkok and the Department for the opportunity to highlight women's issues and to meet with grass roots leaders whose courage and determination give hope for the future.

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